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ABSTRACT

In an effort to support the contention that the levels of student achievement and discipline depend more on administrative style and school ethos than on inner city location and/or social class, race, or IQ of students, an investigation was conducted of a single midwestern urban high school. The procedure consisted of observation and interviews of the principal, three vice-principals, and a representative sampling of teachers, individual students, student groups, support staff, and parents, followed by a review of documentation pertaining to instruction. Eleven separate findings are summarized, suggesting that the administrative style of this school is a negative illustration of the above thesis: student achievement scores are declining because administrative policy does not emphasize high expectations for academic improvement. This lack of administrative involvement in instructional leadership results from a lack of interest therein among administrators, a conflict in leadership style between the principal and his three authoritarian vice-principals, too much concern for administrative tasks subject to evaluation, and a low level of faculty confidence in administrative support for instruction and discipline. Structural constraints on administrative power to upgrade the faculty (i.e., affirmative action quotas, the seniority system) are seen to contribute to a steady decline in instructional quality and to hamper any efforts at effective instructional leadership. (TE)

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Instructional Leadership: The Role of the Administrative Team and Student Achievement

by

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This study grew out of the findings emerging in recent literature which suggests that critical outcome factors such as student achievement and discipline are more functions of administrative climate or style, than location of the school in the inner city, social class of students, race of students, or the I.Q. of students (e.g., Brookover et al.,1978; Edmonds,1979; Ianni,1974; Lezotte,1978; NIE,1978; Pink,1982; Pink and Sweeney, 1978; Rutter et al., 1979; Willis, 1977; Wu et al., 1982; Wynne, 1980). Within the context of describing effective/high achieving schools, several of these researchers note that the ambiance or ethos generated in a building is not only highly related to student achievement and discipline, but is also created, in large part, by the administrative press toward acadedemic excellence. What emerges from even a casual reading of these and other similarly focused studies, is the strong suggestion that student achievement is both building specific and highly dependent on the style of the administrative cadre.

In order to test this assumption a typical urban school was volunteered by a large metropolitan school district in the midwest. What is reported here is part of a larger ongoing investigation of this school. My interest was not the classification of administrative styles: I did not begin with a review of the literature on administration. Rather, the major focus of the study is on the relationship between administrative style, as found in one building, and student achievement. More specifically, (a) if and in what ways the administrative team display instructional leadership, and (b) if and in what ways this leadership is related to student achievement. While the study details one site, it is anticipated that it will help shed some light on how school administrators impact student achievement.

The Study Design

Inasmuch as we are interested in understanding administrative behavior an ethnography of a large urban high school was developed with the full cooperation of the school

administration and central administration. What is reported here are preliminary findings from thirty days in the field.

Observation and interviewing of the principal and three vice principals was the first task completed: the researcher "shadowed" each administrator through several workdays. This activity generated a picture of administrative routines and provided an "understanding" of the school from an administrative viewpoint. The second task was a purposive sampling of faculty representing disciplines, teaching competencies, sex and race, longevity and an identification with the school and the profession. The selected teachers were both observed and interviewed. The third task was the purposive sampling of individual students and student groups: both structured and unstructured interviews were completed with these students. The fourth task was to interview representative samples of both support staff and parents. Finally, all site specific and districtwide documentation pertaining to instruction were reviewed.

All data were entered onto line numbered protocol sheets. Hypotheses inductively generated during data analysis were subjected to a data exhaustion rule (House, 1979; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973). Again, what follows is based on a preliminary analysis. A more detailed analysis will follow later.

The Study Setting

Changed H.S. (a pseudonym) is in many respects a typical inner city school. It is a large old building showing many signs of neglect. The school currently enrolls half the number it was built to hold (N=1200). In five years it has changed from the white elite high school to a school with approximately seventy-five percent minority enrollment. This, in turn, has changed not only the "academic orientation" of the building, but also the community's perception of the school.

During desegregation the school has experienced (a) declining achievement, (b) racial conflicts, and (c) rising discipline problems. Presently, however, the school has little, if any, racial tension and is considered by most a "safe" building. The school remains a dull and depressing reminder of past glories, A high proportion of bussed students creates feelings of "them" and "us" between long time (white) neighborhood families and the "bussed" (black) community.

The school is suffering an image problem. Many disheartened teachers rationalize their disengagement by lamenting the "good old days at Changed High". Vocal white parents lobby for expansion of advanced placement classes. Minority parents are equally vocal in calling for increased emphasis on basic skills remediation. Interwoven throughout this set of conflicting demands, is a district commitment to improve reading and math achievement.

The principal, a white male, supervises three vice-principals - a black female, a black male and a white male: the school has sixty teachers and four full time counselors. Each vice-principal is "responsible" for one third of the student body. One vice-principal (the black female) is responsible for instruction.

Some Preliminary Findings

From extensive observation and interviewing in Changed High School, it is clear that there exists neither a concept of instructional leadership, nor a mechanism that would permit one to be developed. While the principal acknowledges achievement to be a personal concern, the vice-principal charged with this task reports that she is too busy to address it. While both openly acknowledge that this state of affairs is serious, neither could suggest an immediate solution to the time issue, nor offer any theoretically grounded instructional plan should time become available. In short, it became

clear that the administrative team gave a much higher priority to issues of discipline, social control and community public relations, than to school based strategies to improve instruction. The admonitions of central administration notwithstanding, the administrative team at Changed High valued management almost to the total disregard of instruction.

Instruction was seen by administrators to be the concern of the departmental chairs. In reality, departments did not meet. Thus, there was no forum in which instructional issues could be discussed. Moreover, chairs had neither the time nor the authority, as perceived by faculty, to "police" instruction. The net result was that inasmuch as instructional leadership was non-existent in the building, the quality of classroom instruction was the sole responsibility of each teacher.

How did this situation develop and what sustains it? In the interest of time let me summarize some findings:

(1) Administrators spent the majority of their time each day dealing with cutting, tardy, and referred students. These students comprised approximately ten percent of the population. They were referred by five or six faculty. Much of their remaining time was taken up with lunch room, arrival and dismissal duties.

(2) The principal was perceived by vice-principals and a majority of faculty as a paper sorter with poor teaching credentials. His constant attempt to reach a consensus before making a decision was seen as self defeating in a school experiencing such competing expectations.

(3) Faculty did not hold the administrative team in very high regard. Faculty morale was low. The administration had not made good on promises to alter the disciplinary procedures and police student movement in hallways.

(4) Poor teaching and unprofessional conduct (e.g., faculty leaving school prior to the end of the school day) went unattended by the administrative team. Concerned faculty were compromising their own standards.... saying "why bother".. No tenured teacher was undergoing administrative review even when they were referring the majority of disciplinary cases to the office. In one celebrated case, a teacher was told not to refer any more students to the office. The result is that students do anything they want to in this class. No teaching is attempted, yet students receive credit.....

(5) The principal routinely busies himself with activities he feel most comfortable with, while ignoring others. He spends much time daily on routine reporting which is usually done by a secretary. He is unable to conceptualize a school-wide plan for instructional improvement. Many of the stronger faculty simply refuse to work on committees because recommendations are usually emaciated to accomodate a subsequent consensus.

(6) Even though the majority of students seek out those courses that require little work, achievement is still very low. The failing rate is high due, in great part, to absenteeism. Many teachers who remain from the "good old days of Changed High" simply refuse to remediate basic skills... the result is low passing grades and greater problems for the next teacher.

(7) The administrative team fail to understand the relationship between instruction and discipline. By spending the majority of each day dealing with the outcome of an office referral, they ignore the cause of that referral. In the majority of cases, the same students are sent out of the same classes for the same litany of reasons. Administrators could not conceptualize that improving classroom instruction, focusing on basic skill remediation where needed, would be a viable way to stem the daily tide of referrals.

(8) There exists a basic philosophical difference between the principal and his team. In each case the vice-principals indicated that they would take a harder line towards discipline and poor teaching than did the principal. This difference surfaced daily and raised the frustration level of the vice-principals.

(9) While all the administrators thought that they had a strong team, especially with respect to running a well managed school, they differed on the matter of instruction. The principal was concerned about satisfying the (white) parent concerns over advanced placement/college prep classes, while not angering teachers with messages about improving their instruction. The vice-principals, to a person, voiced concern over the low achievement scores, but concentrated their energies on activities they considered they would be evaluated on... Consequently, no one in authority was addressing the issue of improving student performance.

(10) Faculty teaching advanced placement classes were generally well organized and superior teachers - while their students were doing a little less well than in the days of all white enrollments, nevertheless they were doing superior work. While the majority of teachers teaching regular classes articulated the belief that their students could work at grade level, few were either (a) providing remediation, or (b) making demands that would produce work at grade level. In short, the expectations for appropriate classroom work were missing.

(11) School spirit was almost non existent. Student involvement in governance was small and limited in scope. Extra-curricular involvement was poor - caused in part by students need to work and a large bussed population. Moreover, faculty participation in both after-school and weekend events was minimal. There was little student or faculty identification with the school.

Some Concluding Comments

It would seem that the critical factors in administrative styles which emerge from the effective school literature are not present at Changed High. The principal does

not personally articulate and "police" a school based emphasis on instruction. He does not personally champion high expectations for academic improvement. He is not personally visible in classrooms providing faculty with guidance and support. He is not shifting the resources of the school to support an emphasis on instruction. He does not have a strategy to improve student achievement through upgrading teacher effectiveness in the classroom. He does not direct a uniform method of evaluating student performance. Nobody is presently doing these things at Changed High. Clearly, instruction is suffering from this omission: continued low, and in some areas declining, student achievement scores are the result.

While the principal, a hard working, caring and concerned individual, devotes the greater part of his energies to an activity of greatest importance to him, mediating competing demands from black and white parent groups, none of his vice-principals takes the initiative to assume responsibility for instruction. This lack of involvement seems to be a function of four interrelated factors: (a) none of the administrative team sees instructional leadership as a personal strength (at present little guidance has been given from central office indicating what they understand to be instructional leadership), (b) the conflict between the mediation style of the principal and the authoritarian style of the vice-principals, (c) the concern of the vice-principals to perform well on assigned tasks that they perceive they will be evaluated on, and (d) the low status the administrative team holds in the eyes of faculty re. discipline and instruction. These factors all mitigate against the development of instructional leadership at Changed High School. While each of these four factors needs to be addressed before change can occur, the first order of business must be to reduce the amount of time vice-principals spend on the social control of students. Presently, they understand that academic achievement cannot be improved if classrooms and hallways are disruptive, but they do not understand that improved academic achievement is not a natural consequence of lower rates of disruption.

Of course, there are other factors at Changed High School which work against the improvement of instruction. As you might expect, disciplines vary with respect to the quality of instruction - - language and English enjoyed strong faculty, while the sciences and social sciences were less well staffed. Two district policies worked against any wish the school might have to remedy these weaknesses. First, it had been historically difficult to remove poor teachers from any building in the district. It has become far more complicated by desegregation requirements to maintain racial and sex ratios. Second, as teachers moved out of Changed High School they were replaced by teachers with the greatest seniority on the furloughed list. This process does not always ensure that the incoming teacher has either (a) a superior teaching record, or (b) recent classroom experience! At Changed High School the result of these practices has been a lowering of the quality of classroom instruction.

These factors notwithstanding, there is no instructional leadership exerted by the administrative team at Changed High School. Consequently, without changes in either leadership or philosophy, there would seem to be little to suggest that student achievement would improve at Changed High.

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